

## **Safe Space and Brave Space: Improving Interpersonal Relationships in the Communication Center**

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I have been an undergraduate and graduate tutor at my communication center for four years. In this essay, it is my goal to provide direction to those responsible for facilitating uncomfortable discussions among their staff using the concepts of Safe Space and Brave Space.

Research shows that facilitators have a responsibility to create a safe learning atmosphere, while supporting their staff during challenging conversations regarding issues of identity, oppression, power, and privilege (Landreman, 2013). Facilitators must create an atmosphere that allows staff to have controversial conversations with honesty, empathy, and respect (Landreman, 2013). For example, the 2016 presidential election caused our center to experience a spectrum of emotions among staff.

Therefore, our directors invited a third party to help facilitate a discussion about how events outside of the workplace were affecting those within it. However, during the open dialogue, I observed verbal attacks, closed body language, and clear signs of discomfort expressed by my peers. As a result, the conversation shifted from “Safe” to “Hostile.” Throughout the paper, I will utilize this moment to further examine the concepts of safe and brave space, and how they can improve staff’s communication competency.

Safe space is “an environment in which students are willing to participate and honestly struggle with challenging issues” (Holley & Steiner, 2005). It is essential to student development that difficult

conversations take place within a safe space. Educators must find a way to balance students’ preferred methods of thinking with positive encouragement to examine new thinking processes (Holley & Steiner, p.139). The question remains, how do we handle situations that start out with safe, yet challenging, discussion topics, but end up with participants engaging in negative emotions and silence? In order for there to be a didactic take away from the conversation, risky dialogue must take place. Knowing this, we must ask ourselves if there is a way to ensure the safety of participants. Facilitators cannot assume that just because they create a safe environment for some, it will be safe for all. Therefore, this idea of safe space requires reconsideration by facilitators and participants alike. It is vital we continue to facilitate difficult discussions and be brave. Boostrom (1998) states that “we have to be brave because along the way we are going to be ‘vulnerable and exposed;’ we are going to encounter images that are ‘alienating and shocking.’ We are going to be very unsafe”.

The reworked concept of brave space is important because “learning necessarily involves not merely risk, but the pain of giving up a former condition in favor of a new way of seeing things” (Holley & Steiner, 2005, p. 399). This concept is vital because speaking centers cannot provide a service to those in need, if staff cannot work in a space where some may not share the same belief as they do. By revising the term ‘Safe Space’ to ‘Brave Space’ we are able to

highlight the importance of being courageous and willing to change, instead of just creating the illusion of safety. This gives facilitators a better opportunity to generate authentic dialogue. In addition, research strongly encourages the establishment of ground rules to help maximize learning opportunities. These ground rules help demonstrate complete openness between students and facilitators. Landreman, in *The Art of Effective Facilitation*, suggests some basic ground rules, which include: “agree to disagree,” “respect,” and “no attacks.” (p.136) These ground rules allow clarification and ensure there are meaningful takeaways from conversations.

Landreman explains “agree to disagree” as a way “to retreat from conflict in an attempt to avoid discomfort and the potential for damaged relationships” (p. 136-137). This encourages participants to seek an understanding of the opposing viewpoint. During the election scenario, a student who was emphatically displeased with the outcome asked a question that could have been received as belligerent to the opposing group. If someone with the opposing view felt brave enough to express their feelings, it ideally would have maximized the learning opportunity for all. Instead, since no one answered the question that person aggressively asked more follow up questions which only added more fuel to the fire. Utilizing “agree to disagree” allows for a shared understanding by both parties without destroying their working interpersonal relationships.

Landerman’s ground rule, “respect,” is the least controversial but the least acknowledged concept. It’s also the easiest to misinterpret, often because there is an assumed understanding of the word respect. In reality, respect looks different for each person. When asked how one visualizes respect, staff responded with varying opinions. It is important to understand there

are a variety of cultural perceptions involved when defining the term. Landerman suggests we ask participants to give an example of how they would go about challenging the views of others in a respectful manner (p. 148). When there is open discussion with active participation, there is an opportunity to develop a means of vigorously yet respectfully challenging others. Additionally, staff learns how to respond when they are challenged. Allowing time to rehearse different scenarios involving respect will help prevent automatic misinterpretation.

The last ground rule, “no attacks,” is the most crucial. Attacks can occur in conversation when an individual’s ideas or beliefs are challenged and the response is directed at the person, as opposed to the concept. When someone feels they are being attacked, the natural reaction is to become defensive. The goal is to create open dialogue where the concept is being challenged, and not the person. As facilitators it is important to steer conversations in such a manner that no one feels attacked. Also, asking the appropriate questions to redirect discussion allows others an opportunity to verbalize their thinking behind their thoughts and opinions.

Overall, it is important that we use all of these concepts to promote the most effective learning experience for our staff. This idea of safe space, and the reworked idea of brave space, have helped us as a Speaking Center family to better prepare for authentic interactions with one another in challenging dialogues. I strongly believe that incorporating these concepts in training across Speaking Centers will not only help develop communication competency within the center, but also individuals can take what they learn and apply it to difficult situations throughout their lives.

## **References**

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